

6/14/24 Friday

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Russia Seeks to 'Democratize' Global Development Through BRICS

The economic bloc founded by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa is seeking to more evenly spread global economic growth.

Russia is taking the lead in efforts to spread the benefits of global economic development among all countries, according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Lavrov [discussed the creation](#) of a new financial platform that will allow member states to conduct transactions in their own [national currencies](#).

"[BRICS is] actively working to implement the decisions of the Johannesburg summit last year, particularly when it comes to improving the international monetary and financial system, developing a platform for settlements in national currencies in mutual trade," he said at a summit of the bloc's top diplomats.

"Our agenda is extensive. It includes issues that will directly affect the future world order based on fair grounds," he added.

The development is significant as it accelerates pre-existing efforts by countries at the bilateral level. BRICS now includes nine member states after the accession of Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates to the bloc last year.

Dozens more countries are reportedly interested in joining the group, meaning a significant portion of global trade could be conducted without the US dollar within just a few short years.

Economist and academic Linwood Tauheed joined [Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Thursday](#) to discuss the development.

"This sounds like a great idea," said host Wilmer Leon. "It sounds like it will enable smaller countries to have more stability in their economies and provide a balance in world trade as the world moves off of the dollar."

"Yes, not only is it a better idea than the current system where the dollar is the currency of transaction, [but] it's not a new idea," said Tauheed. "This is an idea that was proposed by John Maynard Keynes during the Bretton Woods meetings that eventually ended up with the dollar as the reserve currency."

"In 2009 the governor of the People's Bank of China re-raised the issue of using the Bancor and using the IMF as the vehicle for doing that," he added, using Keynes' term for his proposed process of settling imbalances between countries trading in their own currencies. "That was, of course, rejected in 2009. What is interesting is that the BRICS was also initiated in 2009. And so it seems as if the Chinese had this idea of bringing back the Bancor at least as early as 2009, and understood that the West would not go for it, but they would go forward with their own design."

The proposed system would create a Bancor-like mechanism whereby countries that accumulate an excess in foreign currencies would be granted credits to be used in trade. The BRICS bloc's consideration of the idea suggests such a system could come about voluntarily, with BRICS members adopting the practice as the bloc gradually expands.

Currently the United States benefits though the US dollar's status as the world's [global reserve currency](#), traditionally used in the purchase of oil and other commodities. The arrangement stabilizes the country's currency and has allowed it to pursue massive deficit spending. A system that uses various currencies would work to more evenly distribute the benefits of using countries' currency in global trade, Tauheed explained.

"The strength of the dollar is based on the demand for dollars," the economist noted. "If the demand for dollars decreases because countries are able to buy in their own national currency, then the strength of the dollar relative to other currencies decreases because demand goes down. That means that the demand for other currencies goes up."

"There's a democratization of the power of money in the international sphere," he said. "And, of course, one of the issues of the BRICS is to democratize this process of developing so that it's not a few countries that benefit from trade, but all countries benefit from trade."

BRICS member states have enjoyed impressive economic growth in recent years, with Russia's GDP [expanding](#) at a faster rate than any G7 nation. Meanwhile China's GDP is set to grow at a healthy 5% in 2024, and India's GDP growth is reported to approach 7%

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'Isolated' Ukraine and Allies Don't Want Peace With Russia – Analyst

Western leaders are doubling down on NATO's proxy war against Russia, with disastrous consequences for their domestic and international standing.

Volodymyr Zelensky and sponsoring his regime Western world leaders are gathering for a summit to discuss the country's ongoing conflict with Russia at Switzerland's Burgenstock Resort this weekend.

The sprawling compound, which boasts multiple five-star hotels and scenic views of Alpine landscapes, is [known](#) as one of the world's top luxury mountain resorts. A spa and fine dining round out the amenities at the destination, known for hosting politicians, celebrities, and other high-profile guests.

But as Western leaders indulge themselves in grandeur, their ongoing support for Zelensky's increasingly quixotic war effort is isolating them on the world stage and alienating them among their own people, according to author Jeremy Kuzmarov. The managing editor of Covert Action magazine joined Sputnik's The Final Countdown program Friday to discuss Ukraine's self-proclaimed "peace summit," which has been ridiculed for not including representatives from Russia.

"You can't really have a peace conference with two parties in a war and one party's not involved," said the analyst. "It's not going to go anywhere. So this is just a pure charade for public relations to make it seem like Ukraine wants peace, when really they don't," Kuzmarov said.

"There has been ample opportunity for a peace settlement going back to the Minsk peace agreement, before the advent of the special military operation," he noted. "Angela Merkel

admitted that Ukraine only signed that to buy time to build up its military capability and repeatedly violated it through its attacks on eastern Ukraine and the people there.” Zelensky [campaigned on implementing](#) the Minsk accords while running for president in 2019, only to eventually abandon the agreement under pressure from anti-Russia elements.

Observers speculate Zelensky fears the power of extremist paramilitaries in Ukraine, which overthrew former President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.

Such “volunteer battalions” have previously [threatened](#) to defy presidential orders if Zelensky moves towards withdrawing forces from the Donbass region. Last year, Zelensky [released a video](#) of a meeting he held with Andriy Biletsky, the founder of the notorious neo-Nazi Azov Battalion\*. Biletsky has made no secret of his fascist views, once declaring he would “lead the white races of the world in a final crusade... against Semite-led Untermenschen.”

“This is really just a charade,” said Kuzmarov of this weekend’s meeting in Switzerland. “And Ukraine, I think, is more and more isolated in the world community. There are revolts going on in Europe right now and we see the impact at the polls, that a lot of Europeans want to see the war ended and want better relations between their country and Russia.”

“They recognize that that’s advantageous economically, to have good economic relations with the Russians, and this war has cut them off from Russia,” he noted. “And they’re making their voices heard at the polls. So these governments that are aligned with Ukraine in Europe, for instance, are exceedingly unpopular among their own people.”

Recent polling demonstrates that Zelensky’s strongest backers in Europe are increasingly viewed unfavorably by the public. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is [viewed](#) favorably by only 21% of Britons, while German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s approval rating [stands](#) at just 20%. A recent survey [revealed](#) that less than a quarter of voters “trust [French President Emmanuel] Macron to tackle the problems France faces.”

\*The 'Azov' battalion is a terrorist organization outlawed in Russia.

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Rejection of Putin's Peace Offer 'Exposes' True Motivations of NATO's Proxy War in Ukraine

The Russian president has again insisted the country is open to pursuing peace with Kiev, but a cessation of hostilities runs counter to the interests and objectives of Western elites.

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated the country’s conditions for an end to the Ukraine conflict during [a lengthy address](#) at the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Friday.

Moscow’s [central demands](#) are the same as those put forth during previous rounds of negotiations [sabotaged by the United States](#): Ukraine must become a neutral state not aligned with Western powers’ crusade against the Russian nation. Additionally, Kiev must be demilitarized and de-Nazified, Putin stated, and the country must formally renounce plans to join NATO.

The offer was rejected almost as soon as it was extended, leading Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova to jokingly ask whether it had even yet been translated into Ukrainian. “With such statements they want to deprive the citizens of Ukraine of a real chance for peace,” said the Russian official.

But a deeper analysis of the conflict and its history reveals why a peaceful resolution remains so elusive. Sputnik's The Critical Hour program hosted a series of guests to discuss the Russian president's proposal, breaking down the context of the Ukraine crisis and Western elites' deep-seated interest in its continuation.

#### Manufacturing Consent

Anti-Russian sentiment has been on the rise in the West for a number of years, with the emergence of the Russiagate narrative alleging Moscow's influence in the 2016 US presidential election representing a key acceleration of this trend. The conspiracy theory, widely [promulgated](#) by Western intelligence agencies in mainstream media, laid the groundwork for the Cold War-esque narrative that Russia once again represents an existential threat to the West's purported democratic values and, by extension, to the West itself.

Former President Barack Obama had announced a "pivot to Asia" just a few years prior, stressing the importance of responding to China's ascendance as a major world power. Meanwhile, the strengthening of [Sino-Russian relations](#) under Chinese President Xi Jinping helped solidify the formation of a geopolitical bloc countering US hegemony, a dynamic that has intensified with the growth of the BRICS economic alliance. The United States has become increasingly intent on challenging this counter-hegemonic force and undermining Russia in particular.

The launch of Russia's special military operation in the Donbass finally gave the US an excuse to confront Moscow militarily, with Western media portraying Russia as a belligerent imperialist power. But the claim bore little resemblance to reality.

"We need to remember that Russia did not want to have to invade Ukraine," noted Margaret Flowers, a peace activist and editor at the website Popular Resistance. "They tried and tried and tried to warn and say, 'look, here's what you need to do. Stop killing the ethnic Russians. Stop threatening to join NATO and take our security interests seriously, and the West refused to do that over and over again."

Former Washington Post bureau chief Jon Jeter argued that Western elites still oppose any lowering of tensions between Russia and Ukraine as they remain intent on denying Moscow a victory.

"I would be surprised to see any real discussion of this in the mainstream United States news media, or certainly at the White House itself," Jeter said of Putin's peace proposal.

Independent journalist Caleb Maupin agreed that Western media would continue to help undermine any rapprochement with Moscow. "A recent poll showed 94% of Americans want exactly what Putin just offered, which is a diplomatic end," he noted. "Trump may come in there and say, 'hey, Putin offered a deal.' People want a deal. Now the mainstream media will call him a Russian bot, but 94% of Americans want it."

#### Climbing the Escalation Ladder

"Russia has been incredibly restrained and strategic throughout this, and they from the beginning have wanted to negotiate peace," Flowers observed.

Western powers have instead chosen to escalate the conflict against Moscow, at times [openly describing the war](#) as a ploy to attempt to weaken Russia and China. US President Joe Biden has steadily provided the Kiev regime with more sophisticated and destructive weaponry and has increasingly countenanced Ukrainian strikes within Russian territory.

The provision of arms to Ukraine has furthered the goals of US foreign policy hawks in a number of areas, giving the United States an excuse to increase military spending and manufacture new weapons to replace those sent to Kiev.

The conflict has also [spurred European NATO allies to remilitarize](#), kickstarting the continent's long neglected defense industry in an effort to help supply Ukraine. Sweden has [reinstated](#) mandatory military service, while UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has vowed to do the same. The remilitarization of Europe places Western powers in a position to prepare for a third World War to stem the rise of Russia and China, which figures in the US military have [claimed must take place within the next few years](#). The effort has also, naturally, padded the pockets of arms manufacturers and military contractors.

"They've really milked it for all it's worth," said Maupin. "We're going to learn that this war was the biggest money laundering operation in history."

"Once the deal is made, the Russians are still right there on the border. And so we're going to have to fortify and build up," he added, saying heightened tensions with Russia would continue to drive increased military spending in the years to come.

The human cost of the conflict, meanwhile, has been substantial, with Flowers noting that thousands of ethnic Russians were killed in eastern Ukraine after [the 2014 US-backed Maidan Coup](#). "This was all manufactured by US foreign policy and support for what was happening in Ukraine," said the peace activist. "It's not like Russia is making an unrealistic demand. They're saying, 'look, this is a majority Russian territory that was being attacked for all of these years and that attack was escalated.'"

"They'll stop at nothing and use our money for weapons, to use our people's lives in their proxy wars. This is only going to get worse unless we rise up," Flowers emphasized.

The Peace Imperative

Putin's peace proposal provides a powerful tool to those in the West who seek an end to the war in Ukraine, Flowers claimed.

"Russia's made this offer," she noted. "These are concrete demands. These are reasonable demands. And it's very timely and important because folks need to realize that the Biden administration has authorized Ukraine to attack deeper into Russian territory. This is escalating the situation."

"Russia is saying you need to cut this out," she continued. "This is not going to be good. And we are not going to just sit here idly by forever and watch you continue to escalate your aggression. We are moving towards a greater conflict, a greater risk of nuclear war, is what the experts are saying. And so this is a critical time for peace activists to be saying, 'we need Congress to act now and to get the Biden administration to stop funding and stop supporting this war and stop interfering.'"

"They're just throwing good money after bad – which, of course, that's the point, right?" said Jeter. "They're feeding the military industrial complex, which is the real objective here."

But the journalist warned of dire consequences if tensions continue to escalate beyond control.

"This is a peace deal that I think most people will be more than willing to consider, that they will urge other parties to sit down and say, 'why don't we look at this at least?' It shows the contradictions of the United States, of the West that it's just desperately trying to hold on to power, trying to continually eke out profit for its investment class. And, it's not working. It's not working for the majority of the world."

Host Garland Nixon agreed that the rejection of Putin's peace overtures gives lie to the pretense that NATO is a defensive alliance dedicated to providing security for Europe. The refusal to acknowledge Russia's basic security requirements exposes the dishonesty at the heart of Western rhetoric, he claimed, revealing that the US and its allies have other motives in prolonging the war.

"Over and over again it keeps getting exposed that the US's interests are not the Ukrainian people, they're not peace in the region, that the US is, in fact, pushing the expansion of NATO globally, especially into the Pacific as the US also goes after China," Flowers insisted. "The United States' security strategy is great power conflict, and that's what we're seeing unfold here with the aggression towards Russia, towards China, towards Iran, the support for Israel. It just goes on and on."

"This is not something that the United States is being shy about. And it's really going to have to be us that say this is not acceptable... We need to continue to build on this global momentum pushing for peace."

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Record Number of 'Double Haters' Loathe Both US Major Party Presidential Candidates

Polling has also revealed a growing number of Americans express a lack of confidence in US democracy amidst a broader crisis of legitimacy of US institutions.

Lawmakers in Washington consistently stress the importance of exporting American-style freedom and democracy around the globe, but recent evidence suggests the United States' system of governance has seen better days.

"Biden, Trump are least-liked pair of major party presidential candidates in at least 3 decades," [declared](#) a report by the Pew Research Center polling firm. "With the 2024 U.S. presidential election about five months away, a quarter of Americans hold unfavorable views of both major party candidates – President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump."

"That is the highest share expressing negative views of both candidates in surveys conducted at about this point in the election cycle by the Center and other organizations dating back to the 1988 election."

Online media outlet Axios [identified](#) a number of groups making up the growing number of Americans who reject both major candidates. Among the groups are "old-guard" moderate conservatives who dislike former President Donald Trump but remain committed to the Republican Party and "techno-optimists" driven by civil libertarian concerns over issues like [free speech](#).

Perhaps the largest group of "double haters" are pro-Palestinian voters, including Arab-Americans and young people who oppose Biden's support for Israel's deadly military operation in Gaza. Trump also remains unpalatable for this segment of the population given the former president's steadfast pro-Israel stance and threats to deport pro-Palestine campus demonstrators studying in America on student visas.

“Activists are increasingly rejecting the ‘lesser of two evils’ paradigm that historically has benefited Democrats, raising the risk that they’ll boycott the election or vote third party,” Axios reported. Among prominent third-party US candidates Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has also expressed a pro-Zionist stance, but Green Party candidate Jill Stein has distinguished herself as a supporter of the Palestinian cause. The activist and physician was [arrested](#) at a pro-Palestine demonstration in St. Louis in April.

Libertarian Party candidate Chase Oliver has also [pledged](#) to “end the genocide” against Palestinians if elected president.

A number of smaller left-wing formations such as the Party for Socialism and Liberation also oppose US backing of Israel, but third party candidates typically struggle for influence and recognition in the United States’ pay-to-play political system.

The last time such a large percentage of Americans rejected both US major party presidential candidates was in 2016, when a full 20% of Americans expressed rejection of both Trump and former US Senator Hillary Clinton. Since the 2016 US presidential election, both major party candidates have faced off with voter approval ratings under 50%.

A substantial portion of Americans also rejected both major party candidates in 1992, with observers at the time noting the similarity between former Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. Both figures supported the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as neoliberal economic policy was embraced by the Republican and Democratic Parties alike.

The development led to the entry of American business magnate Ross Perot into the race, who famously [warned](#) of the “giant sucking sound” of US jobs being shipped abroad as a result of free trade policies. Perot has been [praised](#) as “prescient” in retrospect for his criticism of neoliberal economic policy, which he cautioned would “wreck the country.”

NAFTA has also been blamed for impoverish many Mexican family farmers, who were driven out of business by the import of cheap US agricultural product from the US. The free trade agreement and similar CAFTA agreement for Central America have led to a surge of immigration from Latin America as workers seek to escape economic policies and political destabilization imposed by Washington.

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Russia seeks to ‘democratize’ global development through BRICS

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Russia is taking the lead in efforts to more evenly spread the benefits of global economic development through the creation of a platform allowing countries to trade in their own currencies.

“Not only is it a better idea than the current system where the dollar is the currency of transaction, [but] it’s not a new idea,” said expert Linwood Tauheed on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program. “This is an idea that was proposed by John Maynard Keynes during the Bretton Woods meetings that eventually ended up with the dollar as the reserve currency.”

The proposed system would create a mechanism whereby countries that accumulate an excess in foreign currencies would be granted credits to be used in trade. The BRICS bloc's consideration of the idea suggests such a system could come about voluntarily, with BRICS members adopting the practice as the bloc gradually expands.

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'Isolated' Ukraine and allies don't want peace with Russia – analyst

"You can't really have a peace conference with two parties in a war and one party's not involved," said Jeremy Kuzmarov, the managing editor of Covert Action magazine. "It's not going to go anywhere. So this is just a pure charade for public relations to make it seem like Ukraine wants peace, when really they don't."

The analyst joined Sputnik's The Final Countdown program to discuss Ukraine's summit at a luxury Swiss resort this weekend, which has been criticized for not including representatives from Russia.

"There has been ample opportunity for a peace settlement going back to the Minsk peace agreement, before the advent of the special military operation," he noted. "Angela Merkel admitted that Ukraine only signed that to buy time to build up its military capability and repeatedly violated it through its attacks on eastern Ukraine and the people there."

"Ukraine, I think, is more and more isolated in the world community," Kuzmarov continued. "There are revolts going on in Europe right now and we see the impact at the polls, that a lot of Europeans want to see the war ended and want better relations between their country and Russia... And they're making their voices heard at the polls. So, these governments that are

aligned with Ukraine in Europe, for instance, are exceedingly unpopular among their own people.”

Recent polling demonstrates that Zelensky’s strongest backers in Europe are increasingly viewed unfavorably by the public. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is viewed favorably by only 21% of Britons (YouGov), while German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s approval rating stands at just 20% (DeutschlandTrend). A recent survey by Elabe for daily Les Echos revealed that less than a quarter of voters “trust [French President Emmanuel] Macron to tackle the problems France faces.”

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🗣️ “Russia has been incredibly restrained and strategic throughout this, and they from the beginning have wanted to negotiate peace,” noted Margaret Flowers, a peace activist and editor at the website Popular Resistance.

“Russia’s made this offer,” she noted. “These are concrete demands. These are reasonable demands. And it’s very timely and important because folks need to realize that the Biden administration has authorized Ukraine to attack deeper into Russian territory. This is escalating the situation.”

🗣️ “This is a peace deal that I think most people will be more than willing to consider, that they will urge other parties to sit down and say, ‘why don’t we look at this at least?’ It shows the contradictions of the United States, of the West that it’s just desperately trying to hold on to power, trying to continually eke out profit for its investment class. And, it’s not working. It’s not working for the majority of the world,” journalist Jon Jeter emphasized.

The conflict has also spurred European NATO allies to remilitarize, kickstarting the continent’s long neglected defense industry in an effort to help supply Ukraine. The remilitarization of Europe, naturally, padded the pockets of arms manufacturers and military contractors, according to Caleb Maupin, an independent journalist and reporter for RT.

🗣️ “They’ve really milked it for all it’s worth,” said Maupin. “We’re going to learn that this war was the biggest money laundering operation in history.”

“Once the deal is made, the Russians are still right there on the border. And so we’re going to have to fortify and build up,” he added, saying heightened tensions with Russia would continue to drive increased military spending in the years to come.

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Record number of ‘double haters’ loathe both US major party presidential candidates

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Online media outlet Axios identified a number of groups making up the growing number of Americans who reject both major candidates. Perhaps the largest group of “double haters” are pro-Palestinian voters, including Arab-Americans and young people who oppose Biden’s support for Israel’s deadly military operation in Gaza. Trump also remains unpalatable for this segment of the population given the former president’s steadfast pro-Israel stance and threats to deport pro-Palestine campus demonstrators studying in America on student visas.

“Activists are increasingly rejecting the ‘lesser of two evils’ paradigm that historically has benefited Democrats, raising the risk that they’ll boycott the election or vote third party,” Axios reported. Among prominent third-party US candidates Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has also expressed a pro-Zionist stance, but Green Party candidate Jill Stein has distinguished herself as a supporter of the Palestinian cause. The activist and physician was arrested at a pro-Palestine demonstration in St. Louis in April.

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Follow the link to learn more

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#### More Americans Now Believe Russia Winning in Ukraine Conflict - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans who believe that Russia is winning in the conflict in Ukraine has increased by 12% since last year, a new Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute poll revealed on Monday.

"Last year, 27% of Americans thought Russia was winning the war, whereas 31% perceived Ukraine had the advantage. Today, 39% believe Russia is winning, with only 19% believing Ukraine has the upper hand," a report on the poll said.

The majority of Americans continue to think that the United States should provide military support to Ukraine.

"The percentage who believe it is important to America that Ukraine win the war remains steady at 75% since 2022," the poll report said.

More than half (56%) of respondents said they supported the US military assistance for Israel, however, respondents remain divided on what has been happening in the Middle East in the past several months, the poll report said.

"Forty-eight percent of Democrats think Israel's response to the October 7 attack has been too harsh, but only 18% of Republicans think the same," the poll report said.

A majority of respondents (54%) expressed confidence that the United States has to be more engaged in world events, as opposed to 42% six months ago, the poll report said.

More than 89% of Americans are concerned about China's military build-up and 75% said they are worried about China overtaking the United States as the world's top superpower, the poll report added.

Sixty-two percent of Americans said they have a favorable view of NATO and 72% support the military alliance's collective defense principle, according to the poll report.

The poll was conducted nationwide between May 20-27 by telephone and online among 1,257 respondents.

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#### Trump Says Deployment of Russian Naval Ships to Cuba Result of Biden's Weakness

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said during a campaign rally that Russia's deployment of a group of naval ships to Cuba is a result of President Joe Biden's weakness.

"Now we have Russian warships and nuclear submarines surrounding Cuba, 60 miles off the coast of Florida," Trump told his supporters on Friday. "How does that make you feel? You feel good about that? and that's only because Biden's weakness is putting us in grave danger. [Russian President Vladimir] Putin has no respect for him. No foreign leader has respect for him."

Earlier this week, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that conducting military exercises in

different regions of the world is a normal practice, especially for such a large maritime power as Russia.

According to US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), the US fast-attack submarine Helena made a pre-planned deployment to the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that Washington has seen such visits before and expects to see them again in the future. US officials have previously noted that the Russian naval deployment to Cuba does not pose a threat to the United States.

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Temporary Pier in Gaza to Be Towed to Ashdod Due to High Seas - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The temporary pier in the Gaza Strip would be removed and towed back to Ashdod, Israel, due to expected high seas, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said.

"Today, due to expected high seas, the temporary pier will be removed from its anchored position in Gaza and towed back to Ashdod, Israel," CENTCOM said in a statement on Friday.

The safety of service members is a top priority and temporarily relocating the pier will prevent structural damage from the heightened sea state, the statement said.

"The decision to temporarily relocate the pier is not made lightly but is necessary to ensure the temporary pier can continue to deliver aid in the future," the statement said.

The pier would be re-anchored to the coast of Gaza in order to resume delivering humanitarian aid to the residents of the Palestinian enclave, the statement added.

In late May, the pier was damaged by bad weather only two weeks after it began operating once the US military constructed it. However, CENTCOM had to temporarily dismantle the pier to conduct repairs after being damaged by bad weather.

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Pentagon Awards Combined \$982Mln to 49 Firms to Maintain Sea Drone Fleet

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department awarded a combined \$982 million to 49 different companies to maintain the US military's fleet of sea drones, the Pentagon said in a press release.

"A multiple-award contract to support current and future unmanned surface vehicle family of systems and subsystems is awarded to the following 49 industry partners...The maximum dollar value for all (total number) contracts combined is \$982,100,000," the release said on Friday.

Through the contract, the Defense Department will procure payloads, non-payload sensors, mission support systems, autonomy and vehicle control systems, ashore and host platform elements, and logistics and sustainment for its sea drone fleet, the release said.

Work is expected to be completed by February 2025 but could extend into 2030, the release added.

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China Urges US to Stop Using Ukrainian Issue as Excuse to 'Smear' China- UN Mission

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - China calls on the United States to stop using the Ukrainian crisis as a pretext to criticize China and suppress its companies, the Chinese Deputy Ambassador to the UN Geng Shuang said.

"We urge the US to stop using the Ukrainian issue as an excuse to smear China and to impose unilateral sanctions and unreasonable suppression on Chinese companies," Geng said at the UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine on Friday.

Geng also pointed out that while the US criticizes China for trading with Russia, it continues its own business dealings with Russia.

Russia called for the UN Security Council meeting to discuss Western supplies of weapons to Ukraine. It is the sixteenth meeting on this topic Russia that has called for and many Western states have deemed it unnecessary.

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Ukraine's Use of Cutting Edge Tech Weapons Micromanaged by Western Servicemen - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - Western servicemen are micromanaging the use of cutting edge high-technology weapons by the Kiev regime, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

"What's more is we know full well that Western servicemen are basically micromanaging the use by the Kiev regime of cutting edge high technology weapons, high precision, long range weapons," Nebenzia said on Friday.

Nebenzia made the comment during a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine, which was requested by Russia.

The Russian ambassador said he could name the British Storm Shadow, the US ATACMS and other missiles in the arsenal of the NATO member states they provide to Ukraine to attack Russia.

Nebenzia urged the UN member states and the UN Secretariat not to partake in the conference in Switzerland allegedly on reaching a peace in Ukraine because it is nothing more than a provocation.

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G7 Decision on Income From Russian Assets Politically Motivated Illegitimate Step- Antonov

(Updates with context, additional info, background in paras 3)

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) -The decision by the G7 to use the profits generated from Russia's frozen assets for Ukraine's needs is an illegitimate and politically motivated step that will lead to a decline in respect for the dollar-centric system, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov told reporters on Friday.

"The G7's decision to use income from Russian assets for the needs of Kiev is an illegitimate step. There is a clear political motive here: to support the dying regime in Kiev, which is indifferent to the fate of ordinary Ukrainians who are dying in the thousands at the front," Antonov said. "Such generosity at the expense of Russia is another stain on the US financial and economic reputation. The implementation of a scheme worthy of either Ostap Bender or Al Capone will lead to only one thing - a decline in the respect and prestige of the dollar-centric system."

The G7 group will provide \$50 billion in loans to Ukraine by the end of the year, which will be repaid from profits generated from Russia's frozen assets, according to a statement issued after the summit in Italy's Apulia and obtained by Ria Novosti. The G7 intends to provide financing that will be repaid by "future flows of extraordinary revenues stemming from the immobilization of Russian Sovereign Assets held in the European Union and other relevant jurisdictions".

"Western countries have violated all standards of decency. They turned into robbers who stopped following civilized norms of behavior," Antonov said. "Simply put, they began to live not according to the law, but like criminals. The thievish "seven" are robbing Russia of money honestly earned in the context of international cooperation."

Antonov went on to say that Europe does not see the danger of the US policy, which is trying to force its satellites to accept responsibility for a loan secured by stolen money.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that the seizure of Russian state assets by the Western countries will not go unpunished.

"This is not a loan, but an ordinary lie. The funds will be lost in the bottomless and hopeless abyss of the Kiev budget, based on theft and embezzlement," the envoy said. "Perhaps we should add here lucrative contracts for the American military-industrial complex. Maybe it's just about Washington's desire to compensate for its economic failures through additional injections into the national arms business?"

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Senate US Defense Bill Proposes Extending Ukraine Security Aid Authority 2 More Years

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - The US Senate's defense policy bill for 2025 proposes extending the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative authority for another two years, the Senate Armed Services Committee said in a summary report of the bill on Friday.

"Modifies the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) to add an additional two-year period of performance for the authority," the report stated.

US security assistance provided to Ukraine under the USAI authority means that the security equipment for Ukraine will not be drawn directly from the Defense Department stockpiles but will instead be procured from respective manufacturers, which is a process that can take up to several months.

The USAI authority is renewed annually in US defense policy bills, but this measure in the proposal for next year could guarantee the initiative is untouched even if there's a new administration after the presidential election in November.

Former President Donald Trump during a meeting with Republican lawmakers on Thursday in Washington suggested he would not favor sending tens of billions of dollars worth of aid to Ukraine, but would instead use it to raise the wages of American service members.

Earlier, the US House of Representatives passed its version of the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which authorizes \$895.2 billion for national defense discretionary programs.

Once the Senate passes its version of the 2025 NDAA, the two versions must be reconciled before a final vote on the legislation in both chambers.

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implementation of g7 russian assets scheme will lead to decline in respect and prestige of dollar-centric system - antonov

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G7 decision to use income from Russian assets for Kyiv's needs is illegitimate step, political motivation behind this move evident- ambassador Antonov

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End of US-Saudi Petrodollar Pact Signals Declining US Global Trade Role - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The recent lapse of the US-Saudi petrodollar agreement signals the United States' international role in trade is declining but no major shift is expected in the global power dynamic any time soon, Hossein Askari, former IMF Executive Board member and special adviser to the Saudi Arabian finance minister, told Sputnik.

"No, not for now unless it leads to a big shift in the currency denomination of international trade," Askari said when asked if the lapse will lead to a shift in global power dynamics. "It is more a messaging that America's international role in trade is beginning to decline."

Saudi Arabia decided to let a 50-year petrodollar agreement with the United States expire on June 9. The agreement was created after the 1973 oil crisis and required that Saudi Arabia would price its oil exports exclusively in US dollars and invest its surplus oil revenues in US Treasury bonds.

Saudi Arabia can now sell oil and other goods using other currencies like the renminbi, euro and yen, among others.

Askari said the global oil market will not experience any major shake-ups following the end of the US-Saudi petrodollar agreement.

"I don't see Saudi Arabia running to denominate in another currency for financial reasons," Askari said. "If they change the currency of denomination it would be more politically motivated."

Askari pointed out that although the dollar is more stable than other currencies, denominating oil in a basket of currencies such as the IMF's Special Drawing Rights, would make the price of oil even more stable.

Askari also said he does not expect the lapsed agreement to have much of an impact on the role of the dollar in the global financial system.

"While the pact has expired, there is no rush to denominate in other currencies," Askari said.

Askari also pointed out that the importance of oil is declining with the rise of liquefied natural gas, renewable energy and electric vehicles replacing gasoline powered cars.

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Russia Urges UN Nations, Secretariat to Not Get Involved in Swiss Summit 'Provocations'

UNITED NATIONS, June 14 (Sputnik) - Russia urges UN member states and the UN Secretariat to not participate in "provocations" of the Swiss conference on Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"We call on UN member states and the secretariat to not partake in these provocations ... in Burgenstock," Nebenzia said at a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine. "Do not let yourself be used as extras in these hamfisted intrigues the West is concocting."

The proposals that could potentially lay ground for negotiations were put forward by African countries and the League of Arab States. A "deep understanding" of the conflict has also been

demonstrated by China, the diplomat added.

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#### Archaeologists Unearth 18th-Century Glass Bottles at Washington's Mount Vernon Mansion

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - Archaeologists discovered 35 18th century glass bottles in storage pits at George Washington's Mount Vernon mansion cellar, according to a statement on the Mount Vernon website.

"Archaeologists at George Washington's Mount Vernon have unearthed an astounding 35 glass bottles from the 18th century in five storage pits in the Mansion cellar of the nation's first president," the statement said.

Twenty-nine of the 35 discovered bottles are intact, containing well-preserved cherries and berries, which are now under refrigeration at Mount Vernon for scientific analysis, the statement said.

"The bottles are slowly drying in the Mount Vernon archaeology lab and will be sent off-site for conservation," the statement added.

The discovery follows the recent find of two 18th century European glass bottles containing liquid, cherries and pits, part of the \$40 million privately-funded Mansion Revitalization Project at Mount Vernon.

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#### Canada at G7 Pledges Close to \$500Mln in Climate, Inclusivity Investments – Trudeau Office

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) – Canada pledged at the Group of Seven (G7) Summit in Italy's Apulia C\$686.9 million (\$500 million) worth of global climate and inclusivity investments, the Office of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

"The Prime Minister highlighted a \$686.9 million package of measures to strengthen climate resiliency, foster more inclusive communities, and move forward on climate action around the world," the office said. "He also announced that Canada will host the next G7 Leaders' Summit in Kananaskis, Alberta, in 2025."

Ottawa allocated C\$200 million to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Half of the funds will go toward the alleviation of poverty and food insecurity, as well as enhancing climate resilience in the poorest, vulnerable rural areas.

The second tranche will be in the form of a repayable contribution to IFAD's Private Sector Financing Programme, the office said. It will support investments in the agricultural sector in low- and middle-income countries of the Americas, Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Other climate commitments include a C\$360 million repayable contribution to the Asian Development Bank to establish the Canadian Climate and Nature Fund for the Private Sector in Asia. Another C\$6.9 million will be invested through the International Development Research Centre, the office said.

Trudeau further pledged C\$120 million to advance gender equality around the world, with investments to be made through the International Finance Corporation's Facility for Gender Equality, Resilience, Opportunity, and Inclusion Worldwide, and the TradeMark Africa and the Centre for International Studies and Cooperation, the office said.

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US Justice Dept Tells Speaker Johnson It Won't Prosecute Garland After House Contempt Vote

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department in a letter to House Speaker Mike Johnson on Friday said it will not prosecute Attorney General Merrick Garland after the House voted to hold him in contempt of Congress.

On Wednesday, the House of Representatives passed a measure recommending Garland be held in contempt of Congress for defying subpoenas to provide lawmakers with recordings from Special Counsel Robert Hur's interview with US President Joe Biden as part of his investigation into Biden's mishandling of classified materials.

"The Department has determined that the responses by Attorney General Garland to the subpoenas issued by the Committees did not constitute a crime, and accordingly the Department will not bring the congressional contempt citation before a grand jury or take any other action to prosecute the Attorney General," the letter said.

The letter said Biden asserted executive privilege and directed Garland not to release materials subpoenaed by the House committees related to the Hur investigation.

This directive was based on a legal opinion from the Department of Justice, which advised that asserting privilege would be legally proper, the letter added.

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US Missile Defense Agency Says Conducted First Experiment at New Hypersonic Test Bed

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - The US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) said on Friday that it conducted its first experiment at a new test bed for hypersonic technology, which will increase the capacity and cadence of hypersonic tests.

"The Missile Defense Agency and partners successfully conducted the first flight of the Hypersonic Test Bed (HTB) designed to provide a common platform for hypersonic experiments. During the test, designated HTB-1, the vehicle was propelled into hypersonic flight. The flight of HTB-1 permitted collection on numerous experiments, both internal and external, allowing relevant testing in a hypersonic environment," MDA said in a statement.

The HTB will serve as a key component by increasing the United States' hypersonic testing capacity and cadence, enabling rapid technological development and delivery to warfighters, the statement said.

The HTB-1 test also provided an opportunity to use MDA's Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor, the statement said. Initial reports indicate that sensors successfully collected

data after the launch, the statement said.

MDA is working closely with partners to share data to inform the development of enhanced capabilities for a layered hypersonic defense and outpace adversary threats, the statement said.

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#### Russian Youth of America Head Says Left US Over Fear of FARA-Related Charges

(Adds details in paras 6-11)

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - President of the Russian Youth of America Igor Kochan told Sputnik that he had to leave the United States out of fear of being charged for failure to register as a "foreign agent," and is currently in Russia with no plans to return.

Kochan shared that when members of the Russian diaspora were preparing to lay flowers at a monument to WWII soldiers in May this year, FBI officers approached them. The officers asked a lot of questions and accused them of staging a "political rally," although they did not have anything with political symbolism with them. The participants only had portraits of their grandfathers who fought in WWII and flowers, which they all were going to lay at the monument.

"After numerous questions to several participants of the event, including me, my phone was seized for investigative activities. The charges that may be brought against me could result in a sentence of up to 30 years in prison. We have seen such cases both against Maria Butina and Elena Branson, when they were indicted on far-fetched charges," Kochan said.

When asked to clarify what specific charges could be brought against him, Kochan said: "Failing to register as a foreign agent."

"They didn't say that, but when they seized my phone, it was written in the paper on the basis of what articles they were carrying out these investigative activities," Kochan said.

Kochan stressed that it never occurred to him that he needed to register as a foreign agent as he had never been engaged in any political activity and had never organized any events on behalf of any foreign states or authorities.

"This has always been purely my personal initiative. In order to celebrate Maslenitsa or lay flowers at a WWII monument, you don't need to have someone's order. It is enough just to have a conscience and memory of your culture and history," he explained.

Kochan also recalled that four years ago, the FBI came to his old job, after which he was fired.

"That is, this is their systematic work to oust active people who carry out activities for the Russian diaspora," he said.

Kochan said that he is now in Russia without any plans to return "until the political situation changes."

"I really didn't want to end up in a prison cell - just like it was with Maria Butina," he said.

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### Senior US Official Says Putin's New Peace Proposal Should Be Made Directly to Kiev

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin's new peace proposal should be made directly to Kiev, a senior Biden administrative official said on Friday.

"Most of these proposals that he's floated, they have not made their way directly to Ukraine. So that's what stands out, is that they're being made in public, rather than where they ought to be directed, which is to Kiev," the official told reporters.

Earlier on Friday, Putin said Russia would immediately cease fire and declare its readiness to negotiate with Ukraine after Kiev withdraws its troops from the territory of the new regions of Russia. Other conditions for talks included an official statement from Ukraine abandoning plans to join NATO and declaring a neutral, non-aligned and nuclear-free status.

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### Russian Youth of America Head Says Ukraine Activists Threatened Him With Complaints to FBI

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - President of the Russian Youth of America Igor Kochan told Sputnik that complaints have been filed against him to the FBI and shared that Ukrainian activists directly threatened to do so.

Kochan had said he had to leave the United States for Russia out of fear of being charged for failure to register as a "foreign agent." In May, the FBI seized his phone during a WWII commemoration event of the local Russian community. Kochan stressed he has never been engaged in any political activities.

"We know that complaints were filed with the FBI. Ukrainian activists directly said that they would file complaints against me specifically to the FBI, accusing me of being an employee of the Russian special services," Kochan said. "And this is not the first time such complaints have been filed, as I understand. Because I have been receiving such threats over the past 10 years. But in the last few years, some investigative activities have been launched in connection with them."

Kochan does not know whether the current investigative activities were prompted by the Ukrainian activists' complaints.

"Moreover, it is clear that arrests of our compatriots or similar charges against them have been occurring since 2016 - every 4 years, and this is timed to coincide with the US elections," he observed. "It is quite obvious that someone is earning some political points from this in the domestic US election struggle."

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### Europe Allies, Japan, Canada to Help Fund \$50bn Loan to Ukraine - US Official

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) – The European allies, Japan and Canada, will join the United States in providing a \$50 billion loan to Ukraine that will be funded by using interest from

frozen Russian assets, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"I can now confirm the United States won't be the only lender," the Biden administration official told reporters. "Canada went public with their intention to contribute \$5 billion. Europe has suggested that might wish to make at least half of the total loan. Japan is finalizing its plans."

The official said Ukraine can treat the funds unlocked as part of the Russian sovereign assets as a grant, which is not expected to repay the loan through its own budget.

Moreover, the United States also expects the European Union to authorize the continued immobilization of Russia's sovereign assets, the official added.

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Russian Youth of America Head Says FBI Visited Russian Community Members in New York

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - President of the Russian Youth of America Igor Kochan told Sputnik that FBI officers visited members of the Russian community in New York after the intelligence service seized his cellphone in May.

Kochan's cell phone was taken by FBI officers when he and members of the Russian diaspora were preparing to lay flowers at a WWII memorial in May.

"Then the FBI began to come by. They visited not only me, but also representatives of our Russian diaspora - not only acquaintances, but also people who knew me little," Kochan said.

Kochan said he had to leave the United States for Russia out of fear of being charged for failure to register as a "foreign agent." Kochan stressed he has never been engaged in any political activities.

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Russian Youth of America president tells sputnik Fbi visited members of Russian community in new York after seizing his phone in may

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"After numerous questions to several participants of the event, including me, my phone was seized for investigative activities. The charges that may be brought against me could result in a sentence of up to 30 years in prison. We have seen such cases both against Maria Butina and Elena Branson, when they were indicted on far-fetched charges," Kochan said.

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UN Wants Peace in Ukraine Aligned with International Law and UN Resolutions - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 14 (Sputnik) - The United Nations emphasized its desire for a peace settlement grounded in the United Nations Charter, relevant General Assembly resolutions, and adherence to international law, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"What we want to see in Ukraine is peace based on the United Nations Charter, and the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and in accordance with international law," Haq said during the UN briefing when asked what the UN makes of Russian President Vladimir Putin's latest proposal on Ukraine.

Earlier in the day, Putin said that Russia would immediately cease fire and declare its readiness for negotiations with Ukraine after Kiev withdraws its troops from the territory of the new regions of Russia. Other conditions for talks included an official statement from Ukraine abandoning plans to join NATO and declaring its neutral, non-aligned, nuclear-free status.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said later in the day that each time the West has previously declined Russia's peace proposals, "nothing good had come out of it."

He also said, commenting on Putin's statement, that the door to building Eurasian security was open for the European countries.

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Biden Issues Executive Order to 'Strengthen Enduring Resilience' of US Supply Chains

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday issued an executive order to strengthen the resilience of United States' supply chains, highlighting his administration's commitment to economic prosperity, public health and national security.

"By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, it is hereby ordered as follows: Section 1. Policy. As described in Executive Order 14017 of February 24, 2021 (America's Supply Chains), it is the policy of my administration to strengthen the enduring resilience of America's supply chains," Biden said.

According to the statement, the assistant to the president for National Security Affairs and for

Economic Policy will coordinate executive branch actions through the White House Council on supply chain resilience.

"The Council shall conduct a quadrennial supply chain review of industries critical to national or economic security. The review shall address the processes in place to monitor supply chains and the timeliness of the associated data," the statement said.

The statement added that the White House Council will submit a report to the president after each review, with the first report due by December 31, and subsequent reports every four years.

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Trudeau Tells Pope Vatican Must Return Indigenous Artifacts to Canada

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday told Pope Francis that the Vatican must return indigenous cultural artifacts as part of the reconciliation process with the First Nations.

Trudeau met Francis on the sidelines of the Group of Seven (G7) summit in Apulia, Italy. "Today, I had the honor of meeting with his Holiness, Pope Francis, in Italy," Trudeau said on Meta's Instagram platform [Banned in Russia as extremist organization]. "I also advocated for the next step in this work [reconciliation] - returning cultural artifacts from the Vatican to Indigenous Peoples in Canada."

Trudeau further thanked the Pope for his 2022 visit to Canada during which he met with Indigenous Peoples in an attempt to mend grievances between the Roman Catholic Church and the First Nations.

In April 2022, Pope Francis apologized on behalf of the Vatican to the survivors and relatives of Canada's Indigenous Peoples sent to residential schools operated by the Catholic church. In July of that year, the Pope embarked on his first visit to Canada.

During his week-long visit, the Pope apologized for the decades of abuse by the Canadian Catholic clergy and institutions over the Indigenous Peoples.

It is estimated that from the 19th century until the 1970s, some 150,000 children from Canada's Indigenous communities were forcibly sent residential schools run in an attempt to Christianize them.

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Biden Wishes Trump a Happy Birthday, Says 'Age Is Just A Number', The Election Is A Choice

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) — US President Joe Biden on Friday wished a happy 78th birthday to former President Donald Trump, emphasizing that age is just a number.

"Happy 78th birthday, Donald. Take it from one old guy to another: Age is just a number," Biden wrote on X on Friday.

Biden added that the November election is, however, a choice.

The US presidential election is slated for November 2024. The main contenders expected on

the ballot are Biden and Trump, who have both won enough delegates' votes to be their respective Democratic and Republican parties' presumptive nominees.

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Trump Campaign Says Biden's 'Cognitive Decline' on Display During G7 Trip

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's alleged cognitive decline was on display during his trip to Italy for a Group of Seven (G7) summit, Donald Trump Campaign spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said on Friday.

"From Italy to the United Kingdom to New York, millions of people around the world woke up to headlines about Crooked Joe Biden's cognitive decline on full display at the G7 Summit. Biden was seen staring off into the distance and wandering around like a brain-dead zombie, and even had to be ushered by Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni," Leavitt said in a statement.

US adversaries like Russia, China and Iran are watching Biden's decline and plotting how to take advantage of the situation, the statement said.

The US cannot afford another four years of Biden's leadership, the statement added.

A majority of likely US voters, 57%, believe that Biden's mental sharpness is declining, according to a Rasmussen Results poll released earlier this week.

Biden, 81, is the oldest US President in history and would be 86 at the end of a possible second term in the White House.

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Undersecretary General for Political Affairs to Represent UN at Ukraine Summit-Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 14 (Sputnik) - The Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo will represent the UN at the Ukraine summit in Switzerland, the UN Spokesman Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"The Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs will travel to Switzerland over the weekend to attend a summit on peace in Ukraine to be held in Burgenstock..." Haq said during the UN briefing.

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US Officials Frustrated by Israeli Demands for Better Intelligence Sharing - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - Some US officials are frustrated with demands by Israel to provide more intelligence than the United States is already sharing, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

The United States has provided Israel with drone footage, satellite imagery, communications

intercepts and other forms of intelligence in the wake of Palestinian organization Hamas' October 7 surprise attack, the report said, citing current and former US and Israeli intelligence officials.

However, Israeli officials believe that the United States has not provided any sort of intelligence that they could not have gathered themselves, the report said.

US officials view Israeli demands for better intelligence as resting on a flawed assumption that the United States is withholding some information.

The Biden administration restricted the use of US-provided intelligence to locating hostages taken by Hamas, but some US lawmakers are concerned that Israeli could be using the data in airstrikes and other military operations.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, during which some 1,100 Israeli military personnel and civilians were killed and some 240 abducted. Israel subsequently began military operations in the Gaza Strip, including hostage rescue efforts. Some 120 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in the Palestinian enclave, approximately one-third of whom are thought to be dead.

The Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip have killed more than 37,100 people, according to local authorities.

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Biden Criticizes Supreme Court's Overturning of Bump Stock Federal Ban – White House

WASHINGTON, June 14 – US President Joe Biden criticized on Friday the Supreme Court's ruling that a federal ban on bump stocks was unlawful, according to a release.

"Today's decision strikes down an important gun safety regulation. Americans should not have to live in fear of this mass devastation," Biden stated, referring to the October 2017 mass shooting at a Las Vegas concert in which a gunman using a gun modified with bump stock fired more than 1,000 bullets in ten minutes.

Biden said that his administration would continue to take action to combat gun violence.

He called on Congress to ban bump stocks, pass an assault weapon ban, and take additional action to save lives from gun violence, saying that he would immediately sign such bills.

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UPDATE - US House Passes \$895.2Bln Defense Authorization Bill for Fiscal Year 2025

(Updates to add details in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed its version of the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which authorizes \$895.2 billion for national defense discretionary programs.

House lawmakers passed the legislation in a vote of 217 in favor and 199 opposed, after considering hundreds of amendments.

The bill authorizes \$9 billion, or 1%, more than levels enacted in Fiscal Year 2024, according to a House Armed Services Committee summary. The NDAA sets policies related to how separately appropriated funds can be spent.

The legislation includes measures to improve the quality of life for US military servicemembers, such as a 19.5% pay raise for junior enlisted servicemembers and a 4.5% for all others.

The legislation also features measures to address competition with China as well, including an extension of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative and increased funding for hypersonic, cyber and artificial intelligence technologies to deter China.

Moreover, the bill includes measures to end affirmative action at US military service academies, prohibit the Defense Department from pursuing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, prevent the authorization of new climate change programs, and ban the Pentagon from contracting with advertising firms that blacklist conservative news sources.

The White House Office of Management and Budget said that the Biden administration supports the enactment of the NDAA but looks forward to working with lawmakers to address some concerns about the legislation, such as the restrictions on DEI and climate change programs.

Once the Senate passes its version of the 2025 NDAA, the two versions must be reconciled before a final vote on the legislation in both chambers.

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US House Passes \$895.2Bln Defense Authorization Bill for Fiscal Year 2025

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which authorizes \$895.2 billion for national defense discretionary programs.

House lawmakers passed the legislation in a vote of 217 in favor and 199 opposed, after considering hundreds of amendments.

The bill authorizes \$9 billion, or 1%, more than levels enacted in Fiscal Year 2024, according to a House Armed Services Committee summary. The NDAA sets policies related to how separately appropriated funds can be spent.

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ATF Exceeded Authority by Reclassifying Bump Stocks as Machineguns - US Supreme Court

(Updates with more details, background in paras 6-8)

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) exceeded its authority by attempting to regulate guns with so-called "bump stocks" as machineguns, the US Supreme Court said on Friday.

The ATF reclassified semi-automatic firearms with bump stocks as machineguns after the 2017 Mandalay Bay shooting in Las Vegas. Bump stocks do not alter the basic mechanisms of a firearm, but enable users to more easily use a technique that harnesses the recoil of a firearm to rapidly shoot.

"Held: ATF exceeded its statutory authority by issuing a Rule that classifies a bump stock as a 'machinegun' under [federal law]," the Supreme Court said in a ruling.

The ATF rule was challenged in court by a man who surrendered two bump stocks under protest. The man challenged the rule under the Administrative Procedure Act.

The Supreme Court ruled against the ATF in a split six-to-three decision.

US President Joe Biden's 2024 campaign released a statement criticizing the Supreme Court's decision and blaming the situation on former president Donald Trump.

"Weapons of war have no place on the streets of America, but Trump's Supreme Court justices have decided the gun lobby is more important than the safety of our kids and our communities," the Biden campaign said in a statement.

Trump was a vocal proponent of the bump stock ban, which was implemented under his administration.

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US Sanctions Israeli Group for Blocking Humanitarian Aid Convoys to Gaza - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State announced in a release on Friday that it is sanctioning the Israeli extremist group Tzav 9 for blocking and damaging humanitarian aid convoys headed for the Gaza Strip.

"The Department of State is today designating Tzav 9, a violent extremist Israeli group that has been blocking, harassing and damaging convoys carrying lifesaving humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians in Gaza," the release said.

Tzav 9 had been seeking to thwart the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza for months, including by violently blockading roads along the route from Jordan to the Palestinian enclave, the release said.

The group has also damaged trucks and dumped aid on the road, the release said.

The State Department highlighted in the release a May 13 incident in which Tzav 9 looted and set fire to two trucks near Hebron.

The State Department also emphasized that the Israeli government was responsible for ensuring the safety and security of humanitarian convoys transiting through Israel and the West Bank.

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Snowden Says Never to Trust OpenAI After Company Appoints Former NSA Chief to Board

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - Former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor and whistleblower Edward Snowden warned on Friday never to trust tech company OpenAI, after it appointed former NSA chief Paul Nakasone to its board of directors.

"They've gone full mask-off: do not ever trust OpenAI or its products (ChatGPT etc). There is only one reason for appointing an NSA Director to your board. This is a willful, calculated betrayal of the rights of every person on Earth. You have been warned," Snowden said in a statement via social media platform X.

Earlier this month, Snowden said that governments and corporations are trying to gain control over artificial intelligence (AI) technology in order to use it to promote their agenda.

Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, who served on OpenAI's initial board of directors, also criticized the move.

"Can't wait for OpenAI to have access to my phone," Musk said in response to reports on Nakasone's involvement with the company.

Musk said earlier this month that he would ban Apple devices at his companies if they integrate OpenAI at the operating system level.

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Canadian Navy Ship Docks in Havana in First Visit to Cuba Since 2016 - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - The Royal Canadian Navy ship Margaret Brooke has docked at the port of Havana marking the first visit of an RCN vessel since 2016, Canadian Ambassador to Cuba Geoff Gartshore said on Friday.

On Monday, Cuban Ambassador to Canada Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz announced that the Margaret Brooke would be in the port of Havana from June 14-17 ahead of the 80th anniversary of the two countries establishing bilateral relations in 2025.

"Welcome this morning to the HMCS Margaret Brooke vessel, passing the El Moro lighthouse," Gartshore said via the social media platform X.

The presence of the Margaret Brooke in the port of Havana coincides with that of a detachment of Russian naval vessels that began to arrive on an official visit from June 12-17. The flotilla includes the Russian frigate Admiral Gorshkov and the nuclear-powered submarine Kazan.

Amid the deployment of the Russian vessels, the US Southern Command announced that the US fast-attack submarine Helena made a pre-planned deployment to the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

US officials have said the Russian naval deployment to Cuba does not pose a threat to the United States.

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The Supreme Court ruled against the ATF in a split six-to-three decision.

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US Sanctions 4 Individuals for Links to IS, Affiliated Human Smuggling Network – Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury Department on Friday sanctioned four individuals for alleged connections to the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) and an affiliated human smuggling network.

"Today, the United States imposed sanctions on four individuals with links to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), including members of an ISIS-linked human smuggling network," the Treasury said in a statement.

The investigations into the individuals and their designations were taken in coordination with the Turkish government, the Treasury said. Ankara is taking its own domestic action against the network, it added.

Those targeted by the sanctions are Uzbekistan-based Olimkhon Makhmudjon Ugli Ismailov, who is allegedly involved in the human smuggling network; Muhammad Ibrohimjon Niyazov, a purported supporter of the network; Muhammadyusuf Alisher Ogli Mirzoev, who worked to establish an IS militant training camp; and Adam Khamirzaev, the ISIS Georgia province emir, according to the statement.

As a result of today's action, all property and interests in property of the designated individuals and entities in the United States or in the possession or control of US persons must be blocked and reported to OFAC, the statement added.

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## Pentagon Operated Secret Campaign Against Chinese COVID-19 Vaccine – Reports

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) – The Pentagon operated a secret program to discredit China's COVID-19 vaccine in the Philippines at the height of the pandemic, Reuters reported on Friday.

In order to counter China's growing influence in the Philippines, the Pentagon's secret social media campaign aimed to discredit the safety and efficacy of the Sinovac vaccine developed by China, as well as other aid, such as face masks, supplied by China.

Most of the posts, made by at least 300 Twitter accounts, appeared in the summer of 2020, centered on the slogan #Chinanavirus, which means "China is the virus" in Tagalog. The campaign began in spring 2020 and expanded beyond Southeast Asia and ended in mid-2021.

A senior Pentagon official confirmed that the department had conducted anti-Sinovac campaigns in developing countries, but did not provide details.